



# Washington Center

## NEWS

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### Assessment and Learning Communities: Taking Stock After Six Years

For six years the Washington Center has been working to encourage the development of learning community programs on campuses around Washington state. In this issue, we report on what we have learned and describe some promising approaches to assessment that we believe make teaching and learning environments more effective.

*Continued next page*

**Participating Institutions:** Antioch University, Bellevue Community College, Big Bend Community College, Central Washington University, Centralia College, City University, Clark College, Columbia Basin College, Eastern Washington University, Edmonds Community College, Everett Community College, Gonzaga University, Grays Harbor College, Green River Community College, Heritage College, Highline Community College, Lower Columbia College, North Seattle Community College, Olympic College, Pacific Lutheran University, Peninsula College, Pierce College, Saint Martin's College, Seattle Central Community College, Seattle Pacific University, Seattle University, Shoreline Community College, Skagit Valley College, South Puget Sound Community College, South Seattle Community College, Spokane Community College, Spokane Falls Community College, Tacoma Community College, The Evergreen State College, University of Puget Sound, University of Washington, Walla Walla Community College, Washington State University, Wenatchee Valley College, Western Washington University, Whatcom Community College, Yakima Valley Community College.

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**“All of these efforts have convinced us of the close connections in learning community work, between curriculum development, faculty development, and assessment.”**

## **Some Background on Learning Communities**

Learning communities are curriculum change initiatives that link or cluster courses together around themes and enroll a common group of students. Although learning community structures are quite variable, they have two common intentions. First, they attempt to provide coherence for students by linking classes together and building relationships between subject matter, or teaching skills (such as writing and speaking) in the context of a discipline. Second, they aim to build both academic and social community for students by enrolling them together in a large block of coursework. Learning community approaches have spread quickly in Washington. Between 25 and 30 colleges and universities in the state now offer some type of learning community program each year, as do dozens more colleges elsewhere in the nation.

Many baccalaureate campuses offer learning communities as a general education option. At large universities, broad, multidisciplinary learning communities have appeared as an

approach to the first term of freshman year, and intradisciplinary learning community clusters have begun to appear as a way to introduce junior level students to majors. At community colleges, learning community programs have sprung up in college transfer curricula and in vocational, English-as-a-Second Language, and developmental programs as well.

These innovative programs live alongside the regular course offerings and are generally optional for students. Relatively simple models, such as the University of Washington's Freshman Interest Groups, have cohorts of 25 students enrolling in a common set of regular courses and, in addition, a proseminar taught by a peer advisor. More complex models enroll students full time in interdisciplinary programs of coordinated study, designed and taught by three- or four-member faculty teams.

Learning communities reform the curriculum, by putting together individually taught courses into coordinated, frequently team-taught larger wholes. The approach brims with opportunities for creating multiple intellectual and social connections between disciplines, faculty and students.

## **Learning Community Assessment: A Grass Roots Initiative**

Learning communities are also innovations. To sustain and thrive, they need institutional recognition and support. Assessment and evaluation work are critical, not only to prove their worth, but to improve them as well.

In 1986, we invited several of the faculty and administrators who were leaders in the few programs then underway in Washington to join an evaluation committee. We thought bringing people together from a variety of programs and institutional settings would strengthen our evaluation of them. Although individuals from some campuses, such as the Matteo Ricci College at Seattle University, had many years of experience with student and program assessment, most of us were beginners, with such questions as, “What is assessment? Who is it for? What, exactly, do we want to prove? What is most worth learning? Which approaches to assessment are particularly suitable for learning communities? Are there approaches that provide immediate feedback to students and teachers?”

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This was the beginning of a modest study and action group, working at the grass roots level. We continue to ask these questions, as we develop and share ways to carry out assessment in the collaborative and interdisciplinary settings in which we are teaching. The Washington Center's evaluation committee has grown over the years to a working group of about 35 people representing nearly as many colleges. We come together several times a year, to learn about different approaches and to bring assessment results, questions, and ideas from each of the model programs on our campuses.

## **In This Issue of the NEWS**

This newsletter pulls together both results and themes of our assessment work. In "Do Learning Communities Make a Difference?" we summarize what is known in Washington about the effects of learning communities on students and faculty. Initial results indicate multiple positive effects on both students and faculty. We hope these findings will encourage additional research, and stimulate more detailed questions about learning community practices.

"Promising Approaches that Directly Improve the Teaching and Learning Process" highlights several assessment practices that we think bring together teaching and learning, and teaching and assessment. They are as appropriate for regular classrooms as they are for learning communities. Steve Hunter's article, "Walking the Assessment Line at a Non-Traditional College" offers some additional news about projects Evergreen has initiated to gain insight into its unique curriculum, built largely around learning community models.

All of these efforts have convinced us of the close connections in learning community work, between curriculum development, faculty development, and assessment. When these three elements are interwoven, and teachers have the time and space to work on them simultaneously, the learning environment is enormously enriched for students and faculty alike. We are grateful to all of you who have participated in the learning community effort and shared with us your progress and your questions.

# What Differences do Learning Communities Make?

by Jean MacGregor

Who are the students who join our learning community programs? Do they self-select into these collaborative and interdisciplinary settings, and then develop already-formed interests and abilities in active and collaborative learning? If not, what in the learning community experience engages them? Is it merely a positive, socially reinforcing experience, or do learning communities contribute to greater achievement and competence in undergraduate performance? This article discusses what has been discovered about learning community students in Washington, and their progress in these programs.



Jean MacGregor, Washington Center for Undergraduate Education, The Evergreen State College (Photo: Tomas Black)

## Students who enroll in learning communities are fairly typical students

Some learning community programs at colleges around Washington and the nation are designed for specific student populations, for example, honors students, returning adult women, or developmental students. However, most programs recruit broadly from the incoming freshmen population or even from the entire undergraduate student body. Faculty members in learning community programs report that their students are generally typical of students on the campus, and the data support these perceptions.

At the **University of Washington**, **Ken Tokuno** reports that freshmen entering the Freshman Interest Group (FIG) program in 1988 and 1989 scored slightly higher on the university's Admissions Index (calculated from high school grade point average and scholastic test scores) than the rest of the Freshman class. However, in the fall of '90, the scores were almost identical. Over the years 1988-90, the FIG students had a smaller percentage of students of color (about 29% compared to about 38% in the non-FIG group), a slightly higher percentage of women (54% compared to about 47%) and slightly more non-resident students.

**Jeff Chertok** made a modest study of Freshman Interest Group students at **Eastern Washington University** two years ago. He found the FIG groups tended to have a higher percentage of females, and a higher percentage of students from smaller home towns and towns farther away from Cheney—perhaps indicating an expectation that the FIG would provide an avenue for making friends. The EWU FIG students were distinguished by a slightly lower mean high school grade-point average than comparable freshmen, although they finished fall quarter with a slightly higher grade-point average.

At **North Seattle Community College**, **Gail Wilkie's** profile of students enrolling in coordinated studies was not significantly different from the profile of students enrolling in regular courses.

At **Seattle Central Community College**, faculty members **Jim Hubert** and **Jim Kelsey** compared non-learning community students at the college with about 570 students who took one coordinated studies program, and also about 120 who enrolled in more than one quarter of coordinated studies. On dimensions of ethnicity, gender, grade point

average before and after the learning community experience, financial aid, prior college, and various placement tests in mathematics, reading and writing, there were no significant differences. However, the learning community students were significantly different from the larger student population, in that they were younger (mean about 23 years old vs. 28 for non-learning community students), and had 3-4 years since high school compared to about 7 years since high school for the non-learning community students.

During the 1987-88 academic year, **The Washington Center for Undergraduate Education** surveyed more than 1000 students enrolled in learning communities and comparable traditional classes at 12 community colleges in Washington. Students in both groups were similar in average age and gender breakdown; all were highly oriented to complete a four-year college degree, although this was slightly more true of students in learning communities. Students in both the learning community and control groups were about equal in their confidence about making friends. On the Measure of Intellectual Development (described below), learning community students scored slightly higher than students in control groups—indicating, perhaps, a predisposition toward a more interactive, less highly structured, and more conceptually diverse learning environment.

The Washington Center also administered an attitudinal survey and again found only slight differences between the two groups. Learning community students were remarkably similar to those in the control groups in self-motivation, self-satisfaction, and attitudes toward competition, collaboration, college, faculty and financial well-being.

## Student Retention and Achievement in Learning Communities

At the **University of Washington**, **Ken Tokuno** and **Fred Campbell's** study of 1988 and 1989 Freshman Interest Groups showed that more students stay in courses if they are in a FIG. There is a small difference in overall retention levels favoring students who participate in the FIG program. The differences in overall GPA were significantly better for FIG students even after adjusting for academic potential. Similarly, Jeff Chertok found that Eastern Washington University FIG students had significantly higher retention levels than comparable Freshmen quarter-by-quarter and year-by-year into the sophomore year. The students came into the program with lower high school GPA's, but completed Fall Quarter with higher GPA's, and kept them higher throughout their freshman year.

Community colleges offering learning communities almost uniformly report very similar results—of high rates of retention-to-end-of-quarter in these programs. Two colleges in the Seattle District have completed studies on student retention and persistence in college after their experience in coordinated studies programs. **At Seattle Central Community College**, **Jack Bautsch** and others examined retention of learning community students in transfer, vocational and developmental programs over one year. In spring quarter, about 68% of all Fall-enrolled learning community students were still enrolled at the college, compared to the college-wide average of 49%. **Gail Wilkie**, in her "Learning Communities Enrollment Study" at **North Seattle Community College**, reports that for the years 1986-90, quarterly retention was higher in learning community programs; students in learning communities stayed enrolled for longer periods of time and more often completed degrees at the college; and their performance measured on the basis of final grades was higher.

**Eric Mould** and **Judy Moore**, biology teachers at **Yakima Valley Community College**, have been examining student performance in those biology classes that have collaborative learning or learning community components. Mould and Moore have been developing a new approach to the teaching of Biology 101, which involves collaborative learning both in free-standing biology classes and also in those linked to writing and speech classes. The approach is built around small group problem-solving and mini-lectures (as opposed to a lecture-centered approach), and collaborative preparation for weekly tests. Mould and Moore recently compared the retention and performance of 650 students in this "new" biology class to student retention and performance in their "old" biology classes, and found these results:

■ Retention in the class went from 80% to 92%.

■ Students who persisted but earned a failing grade decreased from 9.2% to 2.4%.

■ 30.4% of the students in the collaborative learning classes earned A's, and 26.4% earned B's, compared to 17.3% A's and 19.9% B's in the lecture format class.

■ The percentage of students earning D grade dropped from 12.2% in the lecture class to 5.5% in the collaborative class, and students earning C's dropped from 29.6% to 27.3%.

"Although one might question the efficacy of using grades as a criterion for evaluating the success of pedagogy," Mould and Moore comment, "we are finding that these increases in performance are occurring with more rigorous exams requiring higher level thinking and communicating skills."

Judy Moore leading a Thursday evening biology study group session at Yakima Valley Community College.



Several community colleges are working to increase success for underprepared or apprehensive students by creating learning communities that link lecture/reading classes to study skills classes, or developmental reading or writing classes. We report on three studies:

**At Spokane Falls Community College, Jan Swinton and Diane DeFelice** compared the performance of a group of developmental students enrolled in a biology/study skills paired class with the performance of four other college biology classes (unpaired and with regular students) taught by the same instructor. In the paired class, the student grade range indicates that the learning community students performed just as well as regular biology students, on comparable tests. In the regular free-standing biology classes, 70% of the students completed the course; in the paired biology class for developmental students, 80% did.

In a second study at **Spokane Falls, Theresa Massey and Dexter Amend** compared the performance of students in another paired class: psychology and study skills. About 70% of the students in the paired class tested in at the developmental level, while about 46% of the students in the free-standing psychology class (taught by the same instructor) tested as developmental. The students in the paired class had a higher completion rate, and performed overall almost as well as the control class. The developmental students in the learning community, and those that entered with low reading scores, outperformed their counterparts in the control class: the tests were the same for both groups of students.

**At Skagit Valley College, Mike Witmar** also compared a group of "high risk" students in a learning community cluster with a control group of students in a traditional psychology class. The students enrolled in "Reading, Riting, and Rats" were taking General Psychology, College Reading and English Composition for 11 quarter hours of credit. The readings for the English and College Reading classes were developed around content and themes from the psychology class. The "linked" psychology class and the control

group psychology class were taught by the same instructor, with the same lecture/discussion format and the same objective tests. The students in the learning community had significantly lower placement (Asset) test scores than the regular class, but they performed just as well as the "regular" students on the objective tests.

This information about student performance in learning communities is suggestive, but the factors associated with student retention and achievement are complex and highly interwoven. Not only are students learning and performing in contexts very different from typical classes, faculty are assessing students in different contexts. Faculty members come to know students far better than they would typically, and in the more team-taught models, they can discuss—and respond to—these students' work, progress, or problems with fellow faculty members.

## Student Intellectual Development in Learning Communities

Retention data and grade point comparisons provide an indicator of student performance, but they do not do justice to the multidimensional development evident in learning community students. These programs generally offer students a more complex intellectual environment. They expose students to topics from the perspectives of different disciplines, teachers and peers, and ask them to build larger connections and meanings.

Most learning communities demand levels of student participation and responsibility not typically found in general education offerings. Do these socially reinforcing experiences help students develop intellectually as well?

William Perry's scheme of intellectual development in college helps us understand how students function in academic settings and how learning communities foster intellectual development. In *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years* (1970), Perry describes how students move through a series of world views, sometimes pausing, sometimes retreating, and how they come to a more sophisticated "making of meaning" about knowledge and about the world.

In Perry's view, most students begin college in the stage of "Dualism," seeing the world in absolute, right/wrong or black/white terms. These dualists expect a great deal of structure in classroom setting, and see the teacher (the Authority) as the source of the Truth, or at least, the right answers. Then, students move into "Multiplicity," where they begin to see issues from multiple perspectives; they acknowledge that teachers are authorities (with a small "a," now) who provide methods for getting to answers and who teach not so much what to think as how to think. These students generally are comfortable with less structured and more interactive, discussion-centered settings. Eventually, most students leave "Multiplicity" for "Contextual Relativism," where they come to accept the complexities and ambiguities inherent in all knowing. They begin to see that although there can be many answers to a question, some answers are better than others. At this stage, Perry asserts, the hard work begins, as students see the need to make their own decisions and commitments, and to affirm their own values in a complex world. Perry characterizes these more advanced stages of student development as "Commitment within Relativism."

Several studies in Washington and elsewhere have used the Perry scheme to examine student intellectual development in learning community programs. These studies have employed the Measure of Intellectual Development (MID) instrument, an essay-writing test derived from and scored along Perry's positions of intellectual development by the Center for the Study of Intellectual Development, in Olympia, Washington. The MID was adapted from Perry's work by Lee Knefelkamp (1974) and Carol Widick (1975).

Most studies indicate that students enter learning communities as late "Dualists," a level typical of college freshmen. The mean scores of classes fall in a range of 2.6 to 3.0 (on a range of 2.0 to 5.0). In a 1987-88 study conducted by the **Washington Center** (MacGregor, 1987) involving students in coordinated studies programs at Evergreen and at several community colleges, students beginning their learning community experience scored slightly higher on the MID than other students in control groups—perhaps indicating a predisposition toward a more diverse and complex learning setting. However, students generally made a significant and unusual leap in intellectual development during their learning community experience. Students in learning communities in the Washington Center study exited as early "Multiplists," (3.1 to 3.5) significantly more advanced developmentally than their counterparts in control groups. This indicates that the meanings these learning community students are making of their academic environment are more typical of college juniors and seniors.

At **The Evergreen State College**, faculty member **Kirk Thompson** conducted a second major MID study over the past three years. He focused on students who came to Evergreen as freshmen and remained for their entire undergraduate careers. Building on the Washington Center study, Kirk wanted to find out what happens to students after their first surge in intellectual development. A key aspect of Thompson's research (done in collaboration with **Steve Hunter** at Evergreen and with **Bill Moore** at the Center for the Study of Intellectual Development) was the use of student self-evaluations for MID ratings rather than traditional essays produced through the standard MID stimulus questions.

This move reflects a growing interest nationally in portfolio assessment, that is, examining what students actually produce in the course of their education rather than relying on tests and measures that are disconnected from the classroom experience. Though harder to quantify and use for comparative purposes than standardized tests, actual examples of student work possess greater "ecological validity" than test results in the sense that they are direct products of the educational experience, not artifacts of contrived testing methods and situations. Evergreen possesses a considerable body of material for portfolio analysis in the form of its narrative transcripts. The Registrar's Office maintains a record of evaluations written by students and faculty, which, in lieu of grades, make up the student's transcript. At the end of every program, most students submit a document called "The Student's Own Evaluation of Personal Achievement." These are a rich vein of information about how students experience their education.



(Photo: The Evergreen State College)

The student self-evaluations analyzed in Kirk Thompson's study were blindly rated: identifying information was stripped from the self-evaluations and the documents were randomly organized according to author or sequence from freshman to senior year. The study showed that:

- Students enter Evergreen with a slightly more complex level of intellectual development than typical freshmen;
- The freshman year has the greatest impact on students' intellectual development. They make the biggest leap during the freshman year (confirming the earlier Washington Center study);
- Freshman-to-senior gains exceed norms at colleges elsewhere. In general, students continue to develop more slowly during sophomore and junior years, but a sizable group of students appear to surge again in their senior year, to a range of 4.5 to 5.0.

A third MID study is underway, involving **Western Washington University's Fairhaven College**, whose curriculum and pedagogy involve interdisciplinary studies, collaborative work, and student self-evaluation. Fairhaven Dean **Marie Eaton** reports that this study will be similar to Kirk Thompson's, in that student narrative self-evaluations from freshman to senior year are being rated with the MID protocol. The documents being rated are both Fairhaven students' self-evaluations from discrete classes, and the required senior year "Summary and Evaluation" paper. This paper is a major undertaking for the Fairhaven College students: it asks them to draw together an evaluation of the entire undergraduate experience.

## Students' Views of Learning Communities

Quantitative measures provide a picture of student retention and intellectual growth, but they do not adequately show what happens to students in learning communities. While we have abundant anecdotal material about student satisfaction with learning community programs, we need to learn more. What do students value about these programs? What adjustments and problems do they face? What difference do they think the programs have made for them? What have they discovered about their own learning? What are they taking with them as they move back into more traditional classroom settings?

Quantitative studies do not answer these questions, or provide the feedback needed to improve the programs. To understand student responses to their learning community experience and to build in ongoing program evaluation, many programs are exploring ways to gather qualitative information. Several of these approaches are described in the next section of this issue of the NEWS.



One enterprising effort has been undertaken by **Carl Waluconis** and nine other faculty members at **Seattle Central Community College**. This group has been analyzing themes in student self-evaluations written at the end of coordinated studies programs, and particularly examining outcomes that students describe as resulting from their experiences.

Waluconis comments: "The perspectives of student learning gained by reading these essays was one of the most valuable components of the process for the faculty readers." Apparently, finding agreement on what outcome a student was describing became a conversation in which faculty could reexamine their own goals in the classroom. The outcomes that students described most frequently were developing self-esteem and motivation, developing sensitivity and respect for others, building community, making interdisciplinary connections, becoming life-long learners, and building fundamental communication and writing skills.

There is growing interest at Evergreen, Seattle Central, Fairhaven and many other institutions in listening more closely and systematically to the voices of students enrolled in learning community programs.

## Assessment as Discovery and Reflection

These results of the first rounds of learning community research are quite promising. Yet, all of us involved with the learning community assessment effort feel we have made only a beginning. In July, when the Washington Center evaluation committee reviewed what is known to date about learning community impacts, it generated a whole new list of questions. Probably the most important lesson of the group's recent gathering was realizing that we were ready to move from questions about whether learning communities work to why they work. We are asking many new questions, such as:

■ In the diverse models and content in learning communities, what are their key components and goals? Are there fundamental or "core aspects" that make a difference?

■ What happens to students after experiences in learning communities? Are learning communities adequately preparing students for "advanced work"?

■ How do students with different backgrounds (age, cultural background, gender, socio-economic status) experience learning communities?

■ What learning needs are best met by learning communities?

■ Do students have to be at a certain developmental level, in terms of learning and/or language proficiency, to gain from learning communities?

Our next steps will involve delving into some of these questions. We also plan to continue to identify and encourage effective in-program assessment approaches which themselves strengthen the teaching and learning environment. We view assessment as a continuous process of discovery and reflection that both informs and improves the learning community effort. The challenge lies in creating the time and space in our teaching lives to look carefully at our results and discoveries, and to use them productively.

We have been fortunate in Washington state, to have opportunities for inter-institutional dialogue about assessment—both through the Washington Center's evaluation committee efforts and more recently, through the state-mandated assessment initiative at our public institutions. The exchange of ideas and approaches between campuses has strengthened both learning communities and assessment efforts.

**Jean MacGregor** is associate director of the Washington Center for Undergraduate Education at The Evergreen State College.

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# What Difference Do Learning Communities Make with Faculty? An Outside-In View: Faculty Views of Collaborative Learning Communities in Washington Community Colleges

by Gary Tollefson



Gary Tollefson,  
Yakima Valley Community College

In the 1989-90 academic year, my dissertation research focused on Washington community college faculty who have taught in collaborative learning communities over the past five years. Surveying 118 faculty in 14 community colleges, I attempted to identify faculty perceptions about the impact learning communities had on general education programs and practices; their relation to student success efforts; their effect on faculty development; and the learning community implementation process. I was pleased to have a 58% return rate on my survey, with a number of respondents writing extensive unsolicited letters about their experiences, insights and issues.

**General Education:** Learning communities represent a distinctive view of general education, stressing more holistic general education outcomes. They also represent distinctive pedagogies, emphasizing but not limited to active learning, group work, intensive writing, and frequently, narrative self-evaluation. Many colleges have begun learning communities as a means of offering more effective general education programs.

The faculty respondents in my research identified four ways in which learning communities met general education outcomes better than conventional classes: 1) learning communities provide more opportunities for student writing and speaking; 2) they encourage a more complex world view; 3) they encourage higher order thinking skills; and 4) they offer more coherent course work in general education.

**Student Success:** Student success is a significant issue in community colleges, where underpreparedness for college is rampant, and where many of the enrolled students juggle their academic work with family and job. One measure of student success is simply retention. In his important book, *Leaving College*, Vincent Tinto indicates that student retention issues are inextricably tied to educational practices that create involvement and a sense of community for students. However, building a sense of community is particularly difficult on community college campuses where most students are commuters.

Faculty members in this study indicated almost unanimously that learning communities create a greater sense of community than conventional classes. One of the most distinctive characteristics of collaborative learning communities is a pedagogical style and organizational framework that is student-centered rather than teacher-centered, and that emphasizes active student association and involvement.

**Faculty Development:** One cannot carry on many discussions with community college faculty without concluding that a number of them feel quite powerless to bring about change in their institutions. They often voice a sense of "being out of the loop" of decision-making and change-making conversations. The results of this study illuminated a simple but very powerful fact: faculty members who have

initiated, planned, and taught in collaborative learning communities feel empowered by their experience. They indicated that teaching in learning communities was invigorating, that the teaching environment was improved, and that they felt rewarded by their association with learning communities.

When asked about the effect of learning communities on building an institution-wide sense of community, the majority of teachers said that learning communities often contributed to this effort.

**Implementation Issues:** At the center of organizing and implementing collaborative learning communities are issues of faculty development and empowerment. Dialogue and cooperative efforts among faculty and between faculty and administrators are critically important in learning community development. Faculty comments indicated that important by-products of the implementation process were the emergence of new credible faculty leadership, a reinvigorated sense of faculty purpose, and an interest in seeking new perspectives on disciplines. These perceptions may emanate from the possibilities for change that are presented at the most basic level of the teacher's environment—the curriculum itself.

**Conclusions:** This study suggests that collaborative learning communities, in their many different models and forms, play a significant role in energizing and empowering faculty and students. Teachers see that the fragmented curriculum can come together around their common energy and ideas. Furthermore, they report an improved teaching and learning environment and better performance—by students and themselves alike.

Gary Tollefson is dean of professional and career education at Yakima Valley Community College.

# What Difference Do Learning Communities Make with Faculty? An Inside-Out View: Conversations about Curriculum Reform at Seattle Central

by Nancy Finley

Educators have long been aware of the challenges inherent in providing education to our diverse population. Students come to us with a variety of cultural and linguistic traditions. We worry about a "nation at risk" and recognize the need for experimentation in order to effectively meet the needs of 21st century Americans. As we ask ourselves what it means to be "educated," we experiment with curriculum and pedagogical reform and attempt to evaluate our efforts.

Seattle Central Community College has been actively involved in curriculum reform and evaluation since 1974, aided by Title III funds. Over the past six years, these efforts have focused on structural reform by redefining the classroom as a community of learners grappling with the interconnectedness of ideas and events. This learning community model, which teams of teachers generally teach in 10 to 18-credit blocks, is called Coordinated Studies.

Two hypotheses form the basic structure of coordinated studies programs (CSP's): learning is enhanced if it occurs in a learning community which encourages affiliation, and if it is put within a larger and more meaningful context than isolated courses typically provide. The context is created in a thematically unified program in which faculty make connections among their disciplines. For example, one program had a theme of "Global Village" and involved a faculty team from environmental science, English, math, and economics. In another this fall, an anthropologist, a sociologist and a faculty member in humanities are teaching "Africa of the Imagination."

The "community" hypothesis is based on the notion that individuals in groups can come up with better solutions to problems than individuals working alone, especially if they work cooperatively and with some sense of parity. The roles of teacher as "expert" and student as novice and passive consumer are down-played, and students are encouraged to get to know one another and work together in and out of class.

One of the greatest strengths of the coordinated studies model is its flexibility; it can be tailored to meet the needs of participating students and faculty. Coordinated studies programs have been designed for developmental, English as a Second Language (ESL), and vocational, as well as for college-transfer students. Guiding principles for CSP faculty are simply to be student-centered and to pay careful attention to the process as well as the outcome of learning.

In an environment that is respectful of the process of learning, it is easier for faculty to design a variety of learning activities to meet diverse student needs. For example, some students need to develop confidence by having structured opportunities to practice basic communication and/or computational skills. Others need to stretch their horizons and take risks as independent learners. In general, learning activities are designed to help students improve their oral and written communication skills, and to encourage them to take responsibility for their own learning by participating in such activities as making up exam questions and writing self-evaluations.

The flexibility of the coordinated studies model encourages faculty to experiment with teaching strategies which are appropriate for program topics as well as for students. For instance, "hands-on" experience in a computer or science lab is most

appropriate for learning some course material, while other topics are best presented by a good "story-teller" in a lecture format. Small group work might be the most appropriate strategy for solving math problems or discussing social issues. Even though each group of CSP students and teachers interacts with course material in a unique way, the content and pedagogy of all coordinated studies programs reflect the basic values of affiliation and contextual learning.

The introduction of coordinated studies programs at Seattle Central six years ago has contributed to a climate in which many in the college community are examining what it means to be educated. Not everyone agrees, but that's not what's important. The process of questioning results in a vital and revitalizing conversation with dramatic impacts on the teaching and learning process.

In 1989, a group of Seattle Central's coordinated studies program faculty initiated a formal evaluation of these programs in an attempt to assess their impact. As part of this evaluation effort, I conducted open-ended interviews with 34 faculty who had taught in coordinated studies programs Spring 1984 through Spring 1989. From these interviews, it is clear that the CSP experience left most faculty feeling refreshed, intellectually stimulated, and more willing to experiment with new teaching approaches. With an average of almost 18 years of teaching experience, many of these individuals were good candidates for "burn-out." The stimulation and support resulting from the team-teaching experience saved a few experienced teachers from leaving the teaching profession altogether.

"I feel less isolated when I teach in a CSP." "I have a better feeling of being part of an academic community." "I have learned to respect more the disciplines of other faculty."

Many reported a change in their perception of their role as teachers. By relinquishing some of the authority traditionally associated with this role, these individuals experienced a feeling of relief from the burden of being an "expert."

"I was tired of being at the tip of the triangle; now the classroom is more like a circle." "I am less willing to answer students' questions." "I feel the students have more responsibility." "I now expect students to do more of the work."

For the majority, the CSP experience had a substantial impact in their "solo" classes as well. Some use more group work and less lecture. Others have developed new kinds of assignments, and new course content. Still others revised their grading procedures.

"I now require structured group presentations in my classes." "I require more self-assessments, writing about their own writing." "I evaluate students more holistically now ... I tell students about their strengths and weaknesses as learners." "Students make up exams." "I don't teach from just one angle anymore." "I'm more creative." "I'm putting more energy into changing, examining the content of my discipline."

The coordinated studies model encourages faculty development, but does it provide an enhanced learning experience for students? Most faculty interviewed for this study agreed that although students received less "traditional" course content in a CSP, they were more likely to experience increases in self-awareness and interpersonal skills than if they were enrolled in separate classes. In addition, they thought that students became more effective independent learners and could more easily make connections among different disciplines. It is critical that we find out from students themselves what they think of their CSP experience. A study of their perceptions is currently in progress and is reported on elsewhere in this issue of the Washington Center NEWS.



Nancy Finley, Seattle Central Community College, with her teaching partner, Bill Heid, of Fairhaven College at Western Washington University (Photo: Lucy Hart)

Based on my own coordinated studies teaching experience and these conversations with my colleagues, I believe that coordinated studies, stressing collaboration and contextual learning, results in teaching and learning which is particularly relevant to issues of the 21st century. The heart of these programs is centered on the active and cooperative process of learning. Students and teachers communicate freely so faculty can more easily appreciate the diverse talents and learning styles of their students; the flexibility of the model allows members of the coordinated studies community to acknowledge and honor diversity by creating a wide range of learning activities. Faculty and students learn communally, experiencing the complexities and benefits of interdependence and the consequences of their behavior. Dualistic, "us-and-them" thinking is challenged, making it more difficult to project responsibility onto someone or something else. Thinking becomes more critical but less judgmental.

In academic settings around the world, patterns and relationships between parts of a whole are increasingly becoming the focus of scholarly inquiry. Reductionist cause-and-effect ways of knowing are now being challenged by such ideas as chaos theory and the Gaia hypothesis. The coordinated studies model is compatible with this rapidly changing intellectual climate as it balances the strengths of traditional educational philosophy and pedagogies with a more holistic and transcultural understanding of our world and how individuals learn.

**Nancy Finley teaches psychology at Seattle Central Community College. A longer version of this article appeared in *Educational Record* Volume 71, Number 4, Fall 1990.**

# Walking the Assessment Line at a Non-Traditional College: the Evergreen Experience

by Steve Hunter

Many of us confront the “assessment issue” with mixed emotions, especially if it comes in the form of a state mandate. At a non-traditional college like Evergreen, the prospect of externally imposed forms of assessment was greeted with deep-seated suspicion, if not open hostility, by large numbers of faculty, students and staff.

The college is non-traditional in different ways. It is organized almost exclusively around interdisciplinary learning communities and collaborative teaching and learning. Instead of grades, Evergreen uses narrative evaluations and employs a portfolio system for both faculty and student evaluation. Students are encouraged to become more responsible learners, and to develop their own voices and points of view.

We recognize that innovations are particularly subject to question, and that the college carries a special burden to assess and communicate the effectiveness of its distinctive approach to education. At the same time, traditional measures are often not appropriate. Indeed, many of the innovations in higher education focus on challenging and changing the traditional yardsticks. So questions were appropriately raised and continue to be raised about whether assessment serves our interests, whether it supports teaching and learning, and whether it appropriately communicates what we’re doing.

## Finding Appropriate Approaches

Our first task was to find an acceptable balance between assessment approaches that addressed concerns of external audiences, and strategies that successfully engaged the faculty in discussions of improving teaching and learning. While it’s true that these two objectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive, the initial focus of Washington state on uniform standardized testing did little to endear our faculty to the notion of any kind of assessment.

We have come far since those early days in the development of a “system-level” assessment effort. I think it’s fair to say that a spirit of cooperation and trust in a shared vision of assessment now characterizes the relationship between Washington’s Higher Education Coordinating Board and the colleges and universities of the state. This is truly a remarkable development, considering how palpable the feeling of antagonism was in early state-wide assessment conversations.

Nonetheless, fundamental tensions remain and are perhaps unavoidable. Policy makers feel a need for aggregation, for “bottom line” indices and for the appearance, at least, of precision in measurement. The truth is that what we can aggregate with any agreement among institutions and measure with much precision is not very interesting. It is possible (although not without agonizing over definitions) to report institutional or even system-level retention and graduation rates. It is much more difficult to explain the variation in those rates and to develop with much statistical confidence strategies for improvement. As with physics or accounting, the imposition of precise measures on quite imprecise

phenomena—in our case, student learning—brings with it serious problems and limitations. And yet, legislative timetables do not lend themselves well to detail and endless caveats about measures.

Faculty, on the other hand, tend not to be engaged by aggregate-level data. After all, their work is done with individual students. It has been my experience that the most highly qualitative assessment projects, which remove themselves from any concern about generalizability, have been the most successful in engaging faculty in conversations about (and even actions directed toward) the improvement of teaching and learning. And that is what this work is about. Isn’t it?

So, the tension is still there. At Evergreen, we attempted to satisfy the reporting needs identified by the Higher Education Coordinating Board while still leaving plenty of room to satisfy our own more qualitative interests geared toward reflective practice and self-improvement. The state requested six kinds of information: baseline information, intermediate assessment of quantitative and writing skills, end-of-program assessment, information about alumni satisfaction, employer perceptions, and periodic program review. We’ve been experimenting with a variety of assessment approaches to address these needs. This article summarizes some of our approaches, shares some interesting results, and presents some of our lessons. In a related article elsewhere in this issue of the NEWS, Evergreen’s research on student intellectual development is reported.

**“It has been my experience that the most highly qualitative assessment projects... have been the most successful in engaging faculty in conversations about (and even actions directed toward) the improvement of teaching and learning.”**

*Steve Hunter,*  
The Evergreen State College

## **What’s Different About “Greeners”?**

Evergreen has been fortunate to be part of several national studies of “colleges that make a difference.” We were one of the case studies in George Kuh’s study (Kuh et. al. **Involving Colleges: Successful Approaches to Fostering Student Learning and Development Outside the Classroom.** Jossey Bass, 1991). This research pointed out that Evergreen, like other “involving colleges,” has many features which encourage student involvement both inside and outside the classroom. And at Evergreen the in-class and out-of-class learning experiences are strongly intertwined.

While the following quote from Kuh’s report is stated in more unequivocal terms than any of us at Evergreen could be completely comfortable with, it does reflect some of our intentions. “Evergreen deliberately avoids the tendency to carve students into intellectual (or cognitive) beings on the one part, and feeling (or affective) beings on the other, and then dividing their labors along those lines. To the contrary, this college gives meaning to the idea that students are whole



Academic dean Charles Pailthorpe participates in a book seminar at The Evergreen State College.

persons who think and feel. Consequently, students are recognized and responded to as individuals, take responsibility for their own education, and become autonomous learning partners with their faculty.” (p. 238).

More recently Evergreen has been part of several studies conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA. Several of these HERI studies (1985, 1988) suggest that outcomes—both affective and cognitive—for Evergreen students are “different from the norm” at colleges across the U.S. The nucleus for the research is the Cooperative Institutional Research Program, which has been studying freshmen at colleges nationally for the past 25 years. The surveys have consistently shown that Evergreen freshmen stand out, especially with regard to their motivation for getting a college education. For Greeners, the stated motive has never been to make money, but instead, “to make the world a better place.”

While it was interesting to see that Evergreen freshmen have very distinctive values, it was even more interesting to see what happened after four years of studying at

Evergreen. To explore this question, Evergreen was invited to become one of 150 colleges whose freshmen would be studied over a four year period. From this group, a handful of exceptional institutions, including Evergreen, were selected for intensive follow-up analysis and researchers from UCLA are now conducting in-depth interviews at these colleges.

One of the most provocative parts of the HERI survey clearly demonstrated that the goals of the Evergreen faculty resonate closely with student values. The HERI survey showed high correspondence between student progress and faculty priorities in such areas as diversity, cooperative learning, and student-developed projects.

**“Properly carried out, assessment can create a useful dialogue and new forms of self-reflection about our teaching.”**

*Steve Hunter,*  
The Evergreen State College

## Some Evergreen Student Results

		Evergreen	The Norm
<b>Objectives rated as high or highest for the college:</b>	Allow airing of different opinions	85%	46%
	Create a multicultural environment	84%	42%
	Develop appreciation of a multicultural society	93%	42%
	Help solve social/environmental problems	95%	35%
<b>Agree strongly or somewhat:</b>	Courses include minority perspectives	88%	49%
	Courses include feminist perspectives	88%	41%
<b>Reporting skills much stronger:</b>	Cultural awareness	63%	21%
	Acceptance of different races/cultures	43%	27%

**From the 1989 Follow-up Survey of 1985 Freshmen, TESC Institutional Summary, Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA, 1991**

## Some Evergreen Faculty Results

		Evergreen	The Norm
<b>Activities in last 2 years:</b>	Taught ethnic studies course	41%	7%
	Taught women's studies course	26%	5%
	Research/writing on race/ethnicity	49%	21%
	Research/writing on women/gender issues	38%	19%
<b>Methods used in most or all undergraduate courses</b>	Cooperative learning	94%	27%
	Independent projects	78%	36%
	Group projects	73%	17%
	Experiential learning/field study	51%	20%
<b>Objectives rated as high or highest for the college:</b>	Allow airing of different opinions	85%	48%
	Create multicultural environment	93%	42%
	Develop appreciation of multicultural society	95%	47%
	Help solve social/environmental problems	89%	25%

**From The Faculty Survey for Full-Time Faculty, TESC Institutional Summary, HERI, UCLA, 1991**

## Improving Practice

We undertook a number of assessment projects to gain a deeper understanding of our own teaching and learning environment. Five of our major projects were: a video project that followed a freshman program called "Ways of Knowing" for an entire year; a video study of seminars (the Seminar Talk Project); a survey assessing alumni preparation through the eyes of employers; an alumni survey of Evergreen's Tacoma Campus; and a year-long ethnographic study of academic culture at Evergreen by an external observer.

While much of our assessment work simply confirmed what we thought was true, three projects were particularly provocative to faculty. A brief segment of the "Ways of Knowing" video was shown at an all-faculty curriculum retreat in May. The faculty watching this video expressed great interest in the material and felt it offered important insights into the transition process of students entering college. The candid and public insights the video provided into the process of faculty team-work were even more provocative. We are just beginning to explore how to use these projects to encourage dialogue about teaching and learning in our community.

"The Seminar Talk Project" compared folk notions of seminars that have developed over the years with actual practice. Because seminars are a central feature of Evergreen's pedagogy, the results of this project have significant potential for improving practice. Faculty member Susan Fiksdal, the project director, video-taped a number of freshman seminars. Playbacks of the seminars were shared and commented upon by students and faculty in the programs. Fiksdal also interviewed 15 faculty in order to define the purpose of the seminar, describe successful seminars, and identify strategies considered effective or ineffective. Although there was widespread consensus about the centrality of seminars to learning at Evergreen, the faculty described a wide array of seminar goals and approaches. They also uncovered a number of issues



Entering students at Evergreen participating in their first book seminar.

regarding racism and gender differences, and how these play into seminar dynamics.

Fiksdal's final report includes a section on seminar tips and strategies, "none of which is guaranteed to work, but all of which have been well-tested," as she puts it. There is also a section specifically addressing faculty roles, including selecting materials and leading and shaping seminar discussions. Fiksdal argues that we don't talk nearly enough about our teaching methodologies. She hopes her work will promote widespread dialogue about good teaching and about seminars, the pedagogical backbone of the college.

### What Matters to Students: the Benefits of Hindsight

Polling alumni and employers can illuminate what's working well and what needs improvement. As with many colleges, this has been a major focus of Evergreen's assessment work. We've benefitted from having a relatively short history as a college and excellent placement and alumni offices that have kept track of graduates. An employer survey conducted in 1989 (a methodological miracle in terms of the response rate) was mostly good news. The alumni felt well pre-

pared and the supervisors thought the alumni used their skills well. In comparison with other schools, Greeners received very favorable ratings: the college's strong cooperative education program probably contributes to Greeners' workplace skills. The data did suggest, though, that we should focus more attention on the transition to the world of work. Many alumni felt they needed more preparation for the transition to a world that operates very differently than the college. They mentioned specifically the need for more readings and discussions in class about transitions to the workplace.

How students are educated often makes a big difference. It's also been useful to learn what stands out for our graduates. Since 1972, Evergreen has offered a non-traditional upper division program in Tacoma. The 556 students who have graduated from Evergreen-Tacoma represent a non-traditional college population in many ways: the median age at graduation is 42; 60% are people of color; 52% are African American. The faculty of Evergreen-Tacoma have tailored both the curriculum and the pedagogy to this special population.



Because the Evergreen-Tacoma program has been both unique and successful in terms of student retention and graduation, it was critical to find out, in the alumni's own words, what made a difference to them. Why did it work so well? What stood out for them? Among the most frequently cited positive experiences was the requirement that each student write an extensive autobiography, shaped as a legacy to their children. As one student put it, "personally, the writing of my autobiography was the highlight for me. It created a document that my sons could read and see my experiences—good and bad—and through this they could better understand why I demand so much from them."

## Separating the Forest from the Trees

We also commissioned an ethnographic study of the teaching and learning environment at Evergreen. Interest in a study of the culture of teaching and learning emerged from a review of Evergreen's narrative transcripts. The narrative transcripts provide a rich description of "the Evergreen experience." It is not atypical for a student's 4-year transcript to consist of 40 typed, single-spaced pages. However, after reviewing a collection of transcripts, the study group made a provocative observation: they wondered if the process of narrative evaluation, and in particular the self-evaluation process, might do more to establish a culture of reflection and engagement in learning than would ever be articulated in the transcripts themselves.

Much that is distinctive about Evergreen is simply assumed by faculty members and students. For instance, it seemed significant to this team that the absence of grades at Evergreen was never mentioned in the transcripts. It makes sense, of course, that what is a fundamental—and often startling—absence to an outside observer wouldn't be mentioned. It is a given at Evergreen. Faculty, and very quickly, students, move beyond the absence of grades. It doesn't come up in the course of conversation. This team wondered how many other distinctive characteristics might go unnoticed by Evergreeners because they were so woven into the fabric of our experience at the college. They also posited, albeit somewhat tongue-in-cheek, that a study of the

**"We recognize that innovations are particularly subject to question, and that the college carries a special burden to assess and communicate the effectiveness of its distinctive approach to education."**

*Steve Hunter,*  
The Evergreen State College

culture of teaching and learning by an outside observer might be called for. It could reveal some of the rituals that have taken on sacred status in our own folklore. To an outsider these internal rituals could appear to have no more effect than that of "burning incense and pronouncing incantations over the students." And so, an ethnographer has spent the past academic year on campus. We await the final report with anticipation and curiosity.

## Some Observations

With hindsight, we need to acknowledge that assessment work at Evergreen has been very productive. Certainly, it's raised more questions than answers, but they are often the right ones. Properly carried out, assessment can create a useful dialogue and new forms of self-reflection about our teaching. There have been myriad lessons in this brief period of experimentation, and the studies have provided tangible suggestions for improvement.

We are convinced of the wisdom in pursuing a number of different approaches to assessment. By sponsoring a variety of faculty-developed projects in addition to overall institutional projects, we were able to engage quite a few people.

The assessment work has begun to provide a forum for exploring important issues. Our assessment study group, made up of faculty, staff, administrators and students, has become a lively community of dedicated people. Our examination of assessment approaches and results has provoked deep, sometimes controversial, discussions about teaching and learning.

At the same time, the committee has been disappointed that there hasn't been a more widespread and overt dialogue about the campus's assessment initiative among the faculty as a whole. We've come to recognize that carefully planning the larger discussion around assessment results is as important as the results themselves.

We started the assessment work thinking that Evergreen already had a deeply embedded culture of assessment and reflection. We still think that's true, but we have a great deal more to learn.

**Steve Hunter is director of institutional research and planning at The Evergreen State College.**

# Classroom Research: An Introduction

by Bruce Kochis

*You stop your class with a couple of minutes to go and pass out half-sheets of paper. You ask your students to answer anonymously the following: What is the most important thing you learned today?*

*Back in your office you read the answers and realize that about one-third of the class didn't see a critical link between two aspects of that day's work. The next day you talk to the class about your findings and spend a few minutes discussing for the one-third (and reviewing for the two-thirds) that important link.*

At its simplest level, that is classroom research: finding out if your students learned that day what you tried to teach them and modifying the next class accordingly. As a first step, classroom research helps teachers become sophisticated observers of classroom learning.

## A Tentative Definition

Classroom research is more than just teaching techniques and tricks, though; its basic idea might be best described as “the systematic investigation of the effects of our teaching on student learning for the purpose of improving instruction.” It consists of two aspects: a repertoire of approaches for getting information from students about their learning and an effort to organize that information into a larger picture of practical learning theory.

The leaders in promoting classroom research, **Patricia Cross** (at University of California-Berkeley) and **Tom Angelo** (Boston College), frequently stress that classroom research differs from traditional educational research in purpose and design. Traditional research associated with colleges of education and educational psychology departments is primarily concerned with finding the putative underlying “laws” of learning. Using methods derived from the natural sciences, traditional research idealizes a “typical” student by eliminating some variables and isolating others. This method purportedly leads to generalizations about student learning, generalizations that teachers can then use to design lesson plans and class work.

The obvious weakness of this approach to educational knowledge is that as soon as you reintroduce the bracketed variables in the real world of the classroom, the “results” of the research no longer hold in any kind of practical, obvious way. For example, the war in Iraq had significant effects on the ability of our students to concentrate. But nowhere will you find research like “The Effect of the Persian Gulf War On Vietnamese Students in My History Class, Winter Quarter 1991.” But that’s exactly what you need to know in order to teach them. Classroom research is radically context-dependent inquiry.

## Underlying Principles

Classroom research is based on the principles of “naturalistic” inquiry. In addition to being context-dependent, it is interactive, multiple-focused, interrelated, formative, and concrete. I have often used the words “conversational” or “artistic” to describe it, as opposed to the “technological” approach of traditional research.

But this should not be construed to imply that classroom research is amateurish, soft, or non-objective. On the contrary, it is rigorous, solid inquiry that strives to build for the individual teacher a sophisticated theory of learning. This theory, however, is radically integrated with practice; so much so, in fact, that the distinction between the two reaches the vanishing point.

## More Examples

In their “Sustainable Community Systems” coordinated studies program last year at **Evergreen**, **Robert Cole** and **Russ Fox** report that at the end of lectures, they occasionally asked students to write on index cards “one sentence summaries” of the most important concepts of the presentation. “This was especially useful,” Rob Cole comments, “when I was teaching the students some fairly abstract concepts on alternative forms of economic development: I wanted to make sure students were understanding concepts related to currency-backed commodities and issues of ownership in land trusts. The one sentence summaries clarified for me what to pick up in my next class.”

“We used a second approach,” Rob adds, “when we were not clear whether students were going deep enough with distinguishing between various methods for initiating social change. For part of a seminar, we asked students to draw concept maps to distinguish between the methods of Alinsky, Freire, participatory research, and liberation theology. This exercise helped us and the students to refine our thinking and our discussion of these approaches.”

In a coordinated studies program, “The Fall of Empires,” at **North Seattle Community College**, students were asked one day to bring all their materials—books, notes, and hand-outs. The teaching team then encouraged the students to design the upcoming exam in the program. They were to come up with a list of ten important questions of “fact,” five “concept” questions, and three “synthesis” questions. The students met in small groups to develop and refine their questions, and then in a large group to list them for everyone. According to faculty member **Jim Harnish**, the teachers were “blown away,” not only by the complexity and depth of the questions students were asking themselves, but also by their motivation to explore answers to their own questions during the week of preparation for the exam. “The actual taking of the exam became superfluous,” says Harnish, “when students put so much effort into looking deeper and deeper into the texts and course materials.”

## “At its simplest level, that is classroom research: finding out if your students learned that day what you tried to teach them and modifying the next class accordingly.”

Bruce Kochis,  
Seattle Central Community College

At Seattle Central Community College, the faculty team in the coordinated studies program, “Love, Sex and the 21st Century,” used the half-sheet response papers extensively to find out “who the students were and what their main issues were.” Going to the heart of diversity, the faculty members wanted to elicit from each student ideas, thoughts and feelings in his or her own unique voice. According to faculty member **Nancy Finley**, “Coordinated studies and classroom research are practically synonymous. The philosophy of the learning community implies the seeking out of student ‘voice,’ that is, active participation in the learning process itself.”

### Procedures

Any strategy that an instructor can dream up to get good feedback from students about the course while it is in progress is classroom research. There are, however, some guidelines that have proven successful in most situations.

In my view, students should have an opportunity to respond anonymously, and thus provide the instructor with the best possible information, untainted by fears of evaluation, embarrassment, or reprisal. A classroom is a power structure where teacher evaluation of students is the law of the land. Classroom research avoids run-ins with the law.

Instructors should never ask a question if they don't want to hear the answer. Classroom research sits squarely on a foundation of trust, and therefore, fearing or hiding or not squarely facing the student responses would destroy that foundation and destroy all future negotiations with students. Furthermore, the information from students should be given back to the students. This reinforces the instructor's credibility and informs individual students where they are in the class mix.

The most intriguing and challenging part of classroom research occurs in the privacy of your office, or in the company of your teaching team, thinking about the information you have just received: “How are they thinking about this subject? Why? What shall I (or we) do next?” Classroom research can be intellectually very demanding, and at times, quite perplexing.

Instructors should comment on the feedback, even to disagree or explain. Most importantly, instructors need to be willing to act upon the information they get back from their students. That action can take many forms, but the point of the research is to enhance the learning of these students, this term, and that means doing some modifying right now.

At this point an objection is usually raised to the effect that this is too time-consuming. An extreme form of this objection is the near moral crusade to “cover the material,” regardless of whether or not it was actually learned. The truth is that, done with sophistication, classroom research saves time by increasing learning early on, where the foundations of a course are laid. Teachers are much more able and likely to focus on difficult areas, and to use their time much more wisely.

### Implications

Classroom research opens up the classroom to a broader range of student voices. The traditionally quiet, shy student now has a channel for communicating opinions and ideas to the class as a whole. The class shifts from a teacher-centered to a student-centered classroom, and all students are included.

The unilateral, unidirectional power relationship encoded in the evaluation/grading system is modified to accept the suggestions and advice of the students. Instructors, however, do not give up authority, just authoritarianism.

In hearing regularly what their peers are thinking, students are able to overcome the isolated, individual student/teacher relationship of the past. They now can see themselves as part of a group (including the teacher) that is marked not by competition, but by solidarity in a common enterprise of understanding and using the subject matter with competence and confidence.

The positive effects of classroom research do not occur overnight; they are the result of instructor and student work over a period of time as each learns how to give and take feedback. Nevertheless, classroom research is so powerful and helpful that even the most modest attempt can bring provocative and insightful results.

**Bruce Kochis teaches history at North Seattle Community College and gives workshops on classroom research.**

#### Some useful resources on classroom research:

**Cross, K. Patricia Cross and Angelo, Thomas A. *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for Faculty*. \$15.00, from NCRIPTAL, Suite 2400, School of Education Building, The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1259. (A revised, expanded version of this book will be forth-coming from Jossey-Bass in Spring, 1992.)**

**Guba, Egon G. and Lincoln, Yvonna S. *Effective Evaluation: Improving the Usefulness of Evaluation Results through Responsive and Naturalistic Approaches*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1981.**

# Mid-Course Adjustments: Using Small Group Instructional Diagnosis to Improve Teaching and Learning

by Ken White

As a community college instructor and an instructional consultant for faculty and teaching assistants at the University of Washington, I have learned that any source of information on improving teaching and learning offers important but limited insights. Administrators evaluate course loads, enrollment factors and other long-range considerations, but only the instructor can explain the reasons for instructional decisions. Faculty peers can appraise instructional objectives and the currency of subject matter. But it is really the students who are in a better position to comment on classroom teaching skills, course difficulty, and instructor-student interaction.

Obviously, the clearest picture of a teaching situation emerges when all perspectives are solicited. However, if one is interested in student perceptions, a good place to start is with small group instructional diagnosis (SGID). SGIDs usually take place about mid-way through the quarter or semester. They are structured interviews that ask *groups* of students in a given course what helps them learn and how improvements can be made.

Pioneered in the 1970s at the University of Washington by D. Joseph Clark (1979), more than 200 SGIDs are conducted annually (by the staff at the Center for Instructional Development and Research) at the UW in all schools and colleges with undergraduate students. It has been found that students prefer to provide information to instructors using the SGID procedure (Wulff, Station-Spicer, Hess and Nyquist, 1985) and requests for SGIDs continue to increase from all over the campus. Some departments have even begun to consider SGIDs as an alternative means of evaluating teaching effectiveness. In addition, proponents like Bill Bennett of Seattle Central Community College (Bennett, 1987) and Ann McCartney of Shoreline Community College have helped introduce the approach to several community colleges in western Washington. Today, SGIDs regularly take place in many traditional courses and in learning community programs throughout the region.

**“The SGID process emphasizes that students have a role in shaping their own instruction and learning.”**

Ken White,  
University of Washington

The process takes approximately 25 minutes of class time and requires a facilitator to obtain information directly from students. On a prearranged day, in the absence of the instructor, the facilitator asks students to form groups of 4-6 people. Small groups are important because they place extreme student opinions within the context of group consensus, increase validity, and better reflect the complexity of the learning environment.

The small student groups each select a recorder and come to consensus on two main questions:

1. What helps you learn in this course?
2. What improvements would you like, and **how** would you suggest they be made?

Following ten minutes of discussion, the groups report 2-3 ideas on each question to the entire class. A student volunteer records the comments. The facilitator summarizes the groups' ideas on the board, paraphrasing, questioning and clarifying until students reach consensus and the facilitator demonstrates a clear understanding of their viewpoint.

In order to introduce the approach to instructors, prepare them for the kind of feedback they'll receive, and to help them respond to their students about that feedback, SGIDs usually involve three distinct stages: a pre-SGID conversation, the SGID itself, and a post-SGID discussion.

## The Pre-SGID Conversation

A pre-SGID meeting with faculty members clarifies what the process can and cannot do, explains how it differs from other forms of feedback, and obtains knowledge about course goals, class activities and other matters that expedite the in-class part of the process. It also recognizes that instructors are not always as familiar with the process as they indicate and helps avoid misunderstandings. For example, I once arranged a SGID without a thorough pre-SGID interview, accepting a colleague's assurances that he knew the process. Only later did I discover that he had expected me "to evaluate his use of small groups" only and was very concerned that I had raised other issues in his classroom.

In addition, instructors often need time to talk about sensitive aspects of their teaching. In one meeting, it took over thirty minutes to find out that there was far more tension in a classroom than the instructor had initially described. By taking the time to understand the situation fully, I was able to prepare for a productive and focused SGID, rather than face an unanticipated problem in the classroom.

Lisa Skow, Instructional Development Specialist at the University of Washington's Center for Instructional Development and Research, conducts a Small Group Instructional Diagnosis at the University of Washington.



Recently, a coordinated studies teaching team with whom I worked wanted to know if their students were gaining a thorough understanding of the dynamics between theory and practice in seminars. Another learning community team wanted specifics on course structure and the incorporation of music into the curriculum. In both of these situations, I worked with the instructors to frame SGID questions that would get directly at their concerns. These pre-SGID conversations offered opportunities to know something about the instructors' situations, to respond to their anxiety, to change the generic questions to ones that would meet immediate needs, and to prepare instructors for going back into the classroom with the SGID results.

## The SGID Class Interview

On the day of the SGID, I usually arrive for the first or last 30 minutes of class. Having already discussed the process with the students, the instructor introduces me and leaves. I review the procedure, and explain that the process is voluntary, anonymous and confidential for the instructor. By emphasizing that the SGID is not an evaluation, I encourage a safe environment for student feedback.

While students form their groups, I write the first question on the board. After five minutes, I ask the second question and stress the importance of discussing *how* improvements should be made. After another five minutes, the groups report their responses.

Each comment is written verbatim on the board so that all students see it, and know that I am writing their observations, not my interpretations of them. If student offerings are too long-winded or fuzzy, I paraphrase their idea and get their agreement that my phrasing is on target. Seeking consensus is an important part of the SGID, but I also look for verbal and nonverbal signs of disagreement. Often, students see the course and instructor from differing perspectives. Some say the reading load for the course is too great, while others counter that it isn't. In a

coordinated studies program in which I did a recent SGID, students had differing perceptions about both the structure and the freedom in the program. Again, these kinds of conversations are useful for both the students and the instructor because they contextualize individual student perceptions and insights about the course and test them in a public forum. When a statement is not agreed upon by everyone, I take a vote and record the breakdown.

At the end of the SGID, I thank the students and describe how the instructor will use the first 5-10 minutes of an upcoming class to out-line *possible* changes or adaptations.

## The Post-SGID Feedback

Soon after the SGID, I meet with the instructor and summarize the information, answering questions, explaining comments, and offering alternative interpretations of apparent contradictions. During this phase, the task is to respect student perspectives. Although the intent is not to persuade faculty to agree with the students, it is to highlight themes and explanations that integrate student and instructor perceptions.

Most of the time, students have highly positive things to say, which are affirming to the instructor. Occasionally, students do make negative comments, and sometimes they put things in a harsh way. In these cases, I emphasize that student comments are only "true" from their standpoint. I try to encourage a cooperative venture in problem-solving with the instructor by sharing my own relevant teaching experiences and suggesting where students may be "coming from." In this manner, I try to promote reflection on the issues, not just on the words. The conversation can then move to strategies for change and what the instructor or teaching team can say when returning to the classroom and talking to the students about the SGID results.

**“Seeking consensus is an important part of the SGID.  
...Often, students see the course and instructor  
from differing perspectives.”**

*Ken White,  
University of Washington*

## **Kinds of Feedback**

Like other sources of information, the SGID offers benefits and limitations. Judged by student and instructor satisfaction, (Wulff, Staton-Spicer, Hess and Nyquist, 1985) SGIDs are successful and are widely associated with several advantages: the process builds on a positive foundation of what works well; it offers more diverse and more specific information than do standardized ratings; its mid-term timing allows instructors to make changes the same quarter; and its feedback contains specific suggestions on how to make those changes.

SGIDs are especially useful in student-centered and group-oriented classrooms. The SGID's discussion approach is more personal than individual student ratings and allows the students to hear what other students are thinking. Its group orientation builds on existing associations and expectations and reinforces the learners' expectations for sharing experiences and for developing social cohesion. The SGID process emphasizes that students have a role in shaping their own instruction and learning.

On the other hand, SGIDs have limits. If used as a summative procedure for hiring or granting tenure, the process can stifle open communication with students, not to mention creating extraordinary faculty anxiety and distrust of the process. Students usually share honest and constructive perspectives about their courses because it is designed to help faculty improve their teaching. When SGID information is used otherwise, students can become reluctant to share opinions they feel will threaten their instructors. Consequently, maintaining SGIDs as a formative process—voluntary, anonymous and confidential—helps to encourage open communication and meaningful student feedback.

## **The SGID as a Catalyst for Change**

When combined with other sources of information, the SGID procedure can make an effective contribution to instructional improvement. As a practical, personal and positive process for collecting information on teaching and learning, the SGID can provide a trusted form of data and a catalyst for change in a variety of educational settings.

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# Teaching Self-Assessment

by Thad Kurtz

In many learning communities in Washington, students are asked to write formal narrative self-evaluations of their work in the program. This student self-evaluation may or may not be part of the formal transcript. A number of Washington colleges have long traditions of narrative self-assessment: Evergreen, Antioch University, and Fairhaven College at Western Washington University.

If the point of evaluating students' work were only to rank them, or to give the teacher a lever for encouraging their efforts, or even to describe the strengths and weaknesses of what they produced, then it would seem clear that teachers should do it by themselves. After all, teachers generally know more about the subject and how to deal with it than students do. They have seen lots of similar work. They can draw on wider experience to establish comparative standards. We hope teachers are more objective and less personally involved in the outcome than each student is.

However, the deepest reasons for asking students to formally assess their own work have little to do with a particular piece of work. They have to do with the students' development over the long run. If we want to emphasize not just what the student did, but what the student learned, and how his or her capacity for work in the future has been affected, then the situation changes.

For one thing, now the student may well know some things which are relevant to this new focus of assessment which the teacher does not know, and has no way of knowing unless the student says something about them. If they have learned how to write a paper without agonizing over the first paragraph for hours, or if they now pay a new kind of attention to clouds when they go for a walk, or think about the late Roman Republic when they watch the news, these changes may say more about the student's education in literature or physics or history than their essays or exams do. Yet this learning may be invisible to a teacher. To make it clear that this learning matters, assessment should contain a space devoted to it.

Of course, we expect pleasure, enduring interest, and the ongoing illumination of experience by ideas to affect the quality of students' academic work as well. We would be dubious about claims of such gains if they weren't eventually reflected in products in some way. And in fact, students need to practice self-assessment to improve the quality of their objective work as well as to remind everyone involved (their teachers, any others who read the self-evaluations, and the students themselves) of the importance of relatively subjective gains such as those I just listed.



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**“The practice of self-assessment is a central way for students to acquire the reflective habits of mind which are essential to their ongoing capacities to do good work, and to progressively improve their work over time.**

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The Evergreen State College

The practice of self-assessment is a central way for students to acquire the reflective habits of mind which are essential to their ongoing capacities to do good work, and to progressively improve their work over time. Growth in intelligence, or thinking, is precisely growth in the capacity for ongoing reflective self-assessment. This point is the center of Dewey’s analysis of the difference between mere activity and educational experience in *Democracy and Education*:

Change is meaningless transition unless it is consciously connected with the return wave of consequences which flow from it. ....Being burned is a mere physical change, like the burning of a stick of wood, if it is not perceived as a consequence of some other action. (p. 140)

Thinking...is the intentional endeavor to discover specific connections between something which we do and the consequences which result, so that the two become continuous. (p. 146)

Things would be simpler if students really were clear about what their work was like. The problem with self-assessment is not simply that students exaggerate or somehow misrepresent what they produced. And it isn’t that students are insufficiently willing to blow their own horns. Many beginning college students are simply not in the habit of reflecting on their own work. In the freshman program I taught last fall, “Reflections of Nature,” we asked students to write short cover letters to accompany their work. They wrote four or more short pieces a week about their field observations and the readings for seminar discussion, and their first letter was supposed to select what they judged the two best entries in their accumulated work for five weeks. They were asked, as well, to explain their *reasons* for selecting those pieces as the best ones, in a couple of sentences each. The striking thing about these first cover letters was how many of the students didn’t or couldn’t do the second half of this assignment.

Very often, even those who did say something about why they picked the pieces they did seemed incapable of separating their experience in producing the work from some judgment about the results. They said things like, “I picked this as my best reflections entry because I had a good time writing it.” (Readers who are interested in emotional and cognitive development can no doubt produce various explanations for



Evergreen faculty member Rudy Martin working through a student’s self-evaluation in an end-of-the-year evaluation conference. (Photo: The Evergreen State College)



## “Things would be simpler if students really were clear about what their work was like.”

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why the reflective distance and decentering called for in this assignment should be difficult or incomprehensible for many 19-year-olds. Those of you who are more interested in the sociological and political functions of the American high school will probably simply note that most American students are never asked to judge their own work; only to submit it to somebody else and to accept that authority's grade as settling the question of how good it is.)

So how can teachers support the development of students' capacities to assess their own work? First, we can assign ongoing practice, beginning with small exercises like our cover letter, and progressing to more demanding ones. Second, we can create contexts where alternative or even conflicting assessments are offered. In our program, students frequently participated in small group sessions in which the group looked at and discussed some sample of each student's work in turn.

We can also include student self-assessments as an element of our formal evaluation processes. At Evergreen, narrative evaluations are given instead of grades. Both the faculty member and the student write approximately one page of narrative describing the accomplishments of the quarter. Student self-evaluations and end-of-quarter conferences between faculty and students are an integral part of the College's evaluation system. In the evaluation conferences, there are always two assessments to be compared—one by the student and one by the faculty member. In anticipating such a conference, one tends to wonder, “What will the other evaluation say about that?” That question leads to asking, “How would my work look to someone else, as something independent from me, on its own in the world?” Through these experiences of reflection, writing, and discussion, students gradually learn that there are variances in judgement for which reasons can and should be given. They learn that they themselves have to sort through those, and that their own view of their own work may be habitually inflated or severe.

The other important feature of teaching self-assessment, in my view, is mutuality. Everybody should judge. Everybody should be judged. In our program, when a small group looked at its members' work, it looked at everybody's in turn; and, at

least some of the time, it looked at the teacher's version of the assignment too. In evaluation conferences, students were not just asked to assess their own work, then submit their judgements to a “superior” review and critique. Students write assessments of the faculty member's work and of the program each quarter; Evergreen faculty members write self-evaluations of their own work each quarter; and faculty members write evaluations of each other.

This certainly is not a perfectly symmetrical process. Many faculty members do not trade their self-evaluations with students at final conferences, though I think they should. In most conferences, much more time goes to discussing the student's work than the faculty member's. Nonetheless, in my view, the structure of this process is valuable, even when nothing exciting emerges from a particular exchange. The fact that the faculty are engaged in a similar process is important, and often surprising, to the students. The opportunity to read the teacher's own view of the strengths and weaknesses of a program and of his or her own quarter's work makes the process of assessment a mutual one, and locates the teacher as a finite figure, engaged in furthering his or her own education as well as his or her own teaching.

For both teacher and student what is at the center of this process is thinking in Dewey's sense: developing the capacity for the self-reflective assessment of one's activities. This is essential not only in examining and improving the process of teaching and learning, but in understanding the subjects themselves.

**Thad Curtz is a faculty member in humanities at The Evergreen State College.**

## “Through these experiences of reflection, writing, and discussion, students gradually learn that there are variances in judgement, for which reasons can and should be given.”

Thad Curtz,  
The Evergreen State College

# Reflective Interviews with Learning Community Teaching Teams: Strengthening Dialogue about Teaching and Learning

by Barbara Leigh Smith and Jean MacGregor

Many colleges are becoming interested in assessment methods that use structured dialogue or conversation to illuminate and improve teaching practice. Some of these approaches, such as Joseph Katz's "Master Teacher Approach" (Katz and Henry, 1988) or the Small Group Instructional Diagnosis (described in Ken White's article in this issue of the NEWS), involve interviewing students about their learning experiences. Other approaches involve peer observation, where pairs of teachers observe each other's teaching and then have extended conversations, to give feedback and discuss teaching approaches. The richest of these relationships frequently develop when the teaching pairs come from different disciplines.

In our Washington Center assessment efforts, we have found that reflective dialogues not only promote collegial discussion about teaching, they build a public process of reflective practice in our work as teachers. This happens too rarely on most of our campuses. As Maryellen Weimer observes, "Classroom doors are (usually) shut as tightly as bathroom and bedroom doors." But teaching is not a private activity. It happens in front of observers every single time it occurs. So much about teaching can be learned by observing it." (Weimer, 1990)

## Can Assessment Nourish Innovation?

Learning communities, especially those that are team-taught, are very public activities. They are also complicated enterprises. In these curricular structures, experimentation and discovery come from all directions. They immerse faculty in different disciplinary perspectives, in new content, and in new, synergistic relationships with colleagues as well as students. Frequently, the faculty members are sharing new pedagogical approaches. For faculty and students, the quarter or semester is full of discovery and adjustment. Such intense and energizing experiences often lead teachers into completely new perspectives on their disciplines, their teaching, and their institutional relationships.

As we began to develop ways to evaluate our learning community efforts in Washington, we ran into the predictable challenges of finding appropriate assessment approaches. The question usually asked first of any innovative enterprise is, "How do you know it works?"

Assessing the innovation, and describing whether and how it works is, of course, essential. But it's important as well that assessment, in all its forms, be carried out in ways that support faculty in their risk-taking, while maintaining—and strengthening—the spirit of openness and experimentation that launched the innovation in the first place. The assessment effort ideally should be a continuous process that helps faculty members understand more about their innovative efforts and improve them.

## End-of-Quarter Interviews

As learning community programs were springing up around Washington state, the faculty involved remarked on how much they were learning, and how valuable it is to reflect on their experiences. However, they also observed that it was almost impossible to make the time and create the structure for any kind of extended reflection. At the same time, we (the Washington Center staff) wanted to learn more about how the learning community effort was developing on the various campuses. So, beginning about five years ago, we began to make the time and structure for extended discussions of learning community teaching experiences. Toward the end of each quarter, we began visiting faculty teams to ask how the program had gone. We immediately discovered how generative these interviews were, and they have become one of our major assessment approaches.

These end-of-quarter interviews generally take place during the last three weeks of the quarter or semester. They usually involve one of us, and a learning community team of two to four faculty members. They usually last two hours (at the end of which everyone remarks that the conversation could go on longer). Occasionally other people sit in: a division chair or dean, or other interested faculty members. On a couple of occasions, students hear about the meeting and drop in to offer a testimonial or two.

“Describing whether and how the innovation works is, of course, essential. But it’s important as well that assessment, in all its forms, be carried out in ways that support faculty in their risk-taking, and that strengthen the spirit of openness and experimentation that launched the innovation in the first place.”

After giving us an overview of the program, the teaching team responds to our several open-ended questions:

■ *What were your original expectations for teaching in this learning community program? Given those expectations, in what ways did the experience meet or not meet them?*

■ *What else stands out, in terms of observations and discoveries? What did you notice about your students, your colleagues’ teaching, and your own teaching?*

■ *What issues need attention in the future: what might future learning community teaching teams consider? What might the institution consider or address?*

■ *As a result of teaching in this program, what will you take forward in your work?*

As faculty members talk to us in these interviews, a surprising amount of new information comes to the surface. Teaching colleagues have a chance to look back on the elements of their learning community program and discuss in some detail what they might have only mentioned “on the fly” as the quarter was unfolding. As the quarter is drawing to a close, they have new insights on whether various books (or lectures, or student assignments) worked well—or didn’t. They re-examine the dynamics of the skills or themes or ideas they worked to develop with the students. They relive the best moments when students made discoveries, worked well together, or gave them new perspectives. They frequently get into “if we had it to do over” discussions, which frequently put to rest perceived gaps or mis-steps in the curriculum design or student projects.

Some of the most splendid moments occur in these conversations when faculty members describe what they learned from each other. Almost always, teachers tell their colleagues about the new windows of subject matter that have been opened to them, and they praise each other’s teaching approaches. For many, team-teaching results in the transfer of new pedagogical approaches. Having observed and participated in a peer writing group, or a discussion led with Socratic questioning, or a role play simulation, or a structured problem-solving activity, or any of a host of other learning activities, teachers express not only motivation but confidence in using that approach in their own teaching.

These end-of-quarter conversations are not uniformly rosy though. Sometimes we listen to rather painful reflections on what didn’t work. It’s not always easy to admit that a portion of the program didn’t go particularly well, that some students were a real problem, that some assignments weren’t well thought out, or that the teaching team had disagreements about approach, or problems with communicating. But when the interview is conducted in a manner that encourages reflection and the generation of constructive suggestions rather than blaming—a critical tone to set—the conversation often clears the air. It can help the faculty team re-frame the experience and think of other ways to proceed in the future. It can allow the team to move on with a sense of closure.

## The Value of Outsiders Listening In

Absolutely essential to these reflective interviews, we think, is having one of us come in from outside the institution to convene the conversation. An external interviewer’s questions require that the story of (and the essence of) the teaching experience be re-interpreted as a whole. Moreover, our presence as the newcomer in the group can lift the conversation out of the established social relationships that have been developed within the teaching team.

We suspect our relationship to teaching teams is enhanced by the fact that we truly are neutral colleagues. We have no relationship to local campus issues of faculty rewards and reappointment. We have no particular axes to grind. At the same time, we are not consultants in the usual sense of those who come to make judgments and then go away. We’re in the business of building long-term relationships with campuses, which can only be developed with face-to-face conversations. We work to nurture an atmosphere of trust and a culture of generosity about sharing ideas.

This isn’t to say that we play a passive role in these conversations. We freely share ideas and suggestions that we have garnered from dozens of other end-of-quarter interviews. With the faculty team, we discuss alternative teaching approaches that might have worked better, ways a particular part of the program might have been better integrated, strategies for making learning community administration function more smoothly.

**“Reflective dialogues not only promote collegial discussion about teaching, they build a public process of reflective practice in our work as teachers. This happens too rarely on most of our campuses.”**

### **Gleanings: Insights from the Interviews**

Last year we decided to take the feedback loop one step further. So many useful insights and issues were emerging in these interviews that we distilled our interview notes, and sent them back out to the teaching teams and others involved in learning community work on each participating campus. These learning community “Gleanings” are a combination newsletter and resource directory, with a listing of the bright ideas being developed in various learning communities, and a discussion of curricular and institutional issues facing many of these programs.

We see this feedback loop as both a dissemination strategy and an “action research” effort. The “Gleanings” help to spread specific learning community curriculum ideas from campus to campus. In addition they are building a state-wide dialogue about ongoing problems and issues in learning communities.

### **Creating Occasions for Reflection and Dialogue**

Over the years we have found these end-of-quarter conversations enormously fruitful. They have kept us in close touch with campuses, faculty, and administrators. They have helped us to put people with similar interests and questions in touch with each other, and to understand what other support and resources might be useful.

The teaching teams as well find these end-of-quarter interviews quite valuable. They often thank us with the observation that, “We probably wouldn’t have had this conversation if you hadn’t come.” Many teachers have taken the model and designed parallel end-of-quarter reflective dialogues with their students. Dozens of interviews

have been spawning grounds for new learning community or course offerings, and numerous other campus initiatives.

Conducting these interviews all over the state has been labor intensive. With our small staff, getting around to more than 25 campuses each quarter has become an impossible task. Since we cannot visit each learning community team every quarter, some campuses have developed their own versions of the end-of-quarter interview, including other faculty members as collegial listeners. Still other campuses have begun to hold end-of-year reflective conversations for all the learning community faculty, as a means of looking back over the year and making recommendations for the following one.

This dimension of our assessment work has shown us the importance of creating occasions for reflective time and conversation. Dialogue about actual teaching experiences seems to enhance the spirit of both experimentation and improvement. It’s not that teaching and learning have been too long hoarded or protected behind closed doors, but rather that there have been too few public occasions to examine teaching together. Discovering this may be one of the most important contributions to learning community assessment here in Washington.

**Barbara Leigh Smith and Jean MacGregor are the directors of the Washington Center for Undergraduate Education at The Evergreen State College.**

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**“An external interviewer’s questions require that the story of, and the essence of, the teaching experience be reinterpreted as a whole.”**

# Washington Center Launches NSF-Funded Calculus Initiative

Good news! The National Science Foundation (NSF) has awarded the Washington Center a two-year, \$225,560 grant to improve the teaching of calculus throughout the state. This represents a major step in a new direction for the Center, and another effort to remain at the forefront of curricular experimentation and reform efforts nationally. Our project builds on the work of Calculus Reform and the First Two Year (CRAFTY) project sponsored by the Mathematical Association of America. CRAFTY has experimented with a number of new approaches to the teaching of introductory calculus over the past several years. The Washington Center chose two of the strongest and most innovative CRAFTY models, The Harvard Calculus Consortium and Duke University's *Project CALC*, as provocative models for adaptation to courses in Washington State. *Project CALC* was recently awarded "Best Curriculum Innovation in Mathematics" in the 1991 EDUCOM Higher Education Software Awards competition.

The Calculus Project will involve at least 20 institutions in Washington State over the next two years. Project Co-Directors, **Robert Cole** at **Evergreen** and **Janet Ray** at **Seattle Central**, report that during the 1991-92 academic year, a group of core faculty from nine institutions will experiment with and adapt portions of the Harvard and Duke curricula.

Core faculty for the first year's work represent the following institutions: **Edmonds Community College, Olympic College, Seattle Central Community College, Seattle University, Shoreline Community College, The Evergreen State College, The University of Washington, Western Washington State University, and Capital High School** in Olympia. The core faculty will distill the best results of the first year's efforts into the content of a two-week faculty workshop to be offered during the summer of 1992. At least 20 additional faculty from institutions across the state will be invited to the 1992 workshop.

The Harvard and Duke approaches to the calculus curriculum are similar to efforts already underway in this state, particularly at Evergreen and Seattle Central. They emphasize teaching calculus through its applications, use of new technology (graphing calculators and computer software), and, particularly with Duke's approach, the use of writing as a means of insight into mathematics. The project co-directors will publish an occasional newsletter for interested mathematics faculty, and will report upon the broader results of the project work in a future issue of *Washington Center NEWS*. *People interested in further details of this innovative project should contact Robert Cole or Janet Ray at their respective institutions.*



Planning the National Science Foundation Calculus Initiative are (left to right) Carl Swenson, Seattle University; Mike Pepe and Janet Ray, Seattle Central Community College; and Robert Cole, The Evergreen State College (Photo: Lucy Hart)

# National Center on Postsecondary Learning, Teaching, and Assessment Will Study Collaborative Learning in Washington

Syracuse University researcher Vincent Tinto is beginning a major research project this fall on the impact of collaborative learning environments at two colleges in Washington state. This is one of several research projects being launched this year through the auspices of the new federally funded **National Center on Postsecondary Learning, Teaching, and Assessment**.

Tinto is a well known expert on student retention and the author of *Leaving College: The Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*. He describes his Washington project as, "focusing on the educational impact of current efforts to actively involve students in classroom learning. Research indicates that active involvement heightens the quality of student effort, which in turn enhances learning and heightens student satisfaction with the college experience. Collaborative learning offers a vision of restructuring education that has enormous promise. This comes at an important time, when questions about the effectiveness of faculty teaching and student learning are being raised across the nation."

Beginning this fall, Tinto and his research team will begin their study of learning communities at Seattle Central Community College and of Freshman Interest Groups at the University of Washington. Since 1984, Seattle Central has been operating learning communities of various types in a variety of curricular areas: academic transfer, vocational, ESL, and developmental studies. At the University of Washington, one fourth of each freshman class enrolls in Freshman Interest Groups.

Tinto's research in Washington will combine quantitative and qualitative methods. Syracuse University is well known for its excellent graduate work in qualitative research. Commenting on the design, Tinto indicated that his team will follow a group of students enrolled in learning communities at Seattle Central and at UW, and comparison groups not enrolled in learning communities, for at least one year. They will be using quantitative measures of persistence, achievement, and quality of effort (the so-called Robert Pace instrument). In addition, the research team will build a more qualitative, contextual sense of student learning, through student interviews and ethnographic research involving observation of the programs themselves.

Also, the National Center on Postsecondary Learning, Teaching, and Assessment and the Washington Center will be working together on a Collaborative Learning Sourcebook. The Sourcebook, scheduled for publication in 1992, will include an anthology on collaborative learning as well as an overview of model programs and resources from around the nation.

# What's Happening: Learning Community and Faculty Exchanges at Participating Institutions

## **Bellevue Community College:**

Last Spring Quarter, BCC should have won a prize for "most timely coordinated studies program in the state." "Political Arabesques: Disentangling The Middle East" examined the roots of the Persian Gulf War; it was taught by David Jurji (anthropology), Michael Righi (economics) and Jerrie Kennedy (English). This fall, Bellevue is offering "Close Encounters: Gender and Relationships," a coordinated study taught by Laura Kamm (speech), Gordon Leighton (English), Helen Taylor (psychology), and Francine Walls (library). In addition, Bellevue is launching a new cluster in the business curriculum, with coursework in English (with Laura Burns), economics (Kristi Weir), and accounting (Phil Walter). This cluster will continue into Winter Quarter, with the next levels of English, economics and accounting.

## **Big Bend Community College**

is offering its first learning community this Fall. Joe Rogers is linking his Spanish class to Terry Mirande's sociology class in "Marriage and Family."

## **Centralia College**

has 10-credit learning communities this Fall on both of its campuses. On the Centralia campus, "Human Survival: Cultural and Environmental Challenges" links a biology/environmental studies class with a cultural anthropology class. Dave Coffman and Greg Garman are the faculty members. With a Washington Center Seed Grant, the Morton Center is launching its first coordinated study, "Seeing Beyond the Surface." Vann Cantin and Mike Gaudette are linking their classes in photography and chemistry.

## **Eastern Washington**

**University** is well into the first year of a five-year Title III grant that addresses student retention, faculty development and library enhancement. The student retention activities funded through Title III have created an effort, coordinated by Chris Rosaaen, to link Eastern's freshman orientation with its Freshman Interest Group learning cluster program, which has been under way on a small scale for three years. Cohorts of twenty-five students enroll as a group in three larger, thematically related courses. Each FIG group is also enrolling in an additional, non-graded Freshman Year Experience course jointly taught by one of the FIG faculty and a student services staff member. Six of these new FIG groups were launched this Fall.

The faculty development component of Eastern's Title III initiative supports five different but interrelated activities:

(1) a Visiting Scholar Program bringing distinguished academics to campus to consult on curriculum development and revision;

(2) a series of instructional workshops on improving faculty-student interaction, enhancing critical thinking, integrating liberal arts with professional studies, and incorporating multicultural perspectives;

(3) a summer stipend program for individual faculty members to work on instructional innovation;

(4) a summer 1991 faculty development workshop on computer assisted instruction (building on an earlier Washington Center Seed Grant in this area); and

(5) released time for faculty to develop grant proposals related to curricular development.

## **Edmonds Community Col-**

**lege** has both 10-credit and 15-credit coordinated studies programs this Fall. "Life and Learning" will link Principles of Biology (taught by Ken Marvel) with College Study Skills (Penny Shively). A unique developmental coordinated study program in the sciences, known as "Chemath," integrates Prep for College Chemistry (Mary O'Brien) and Intermediate Algebra (David Chalif). Karen Spring (study skills) and Eileen Soldwedel (history) are team-teaching Western Civilization and College Study Skills. The full-time coordinated studies offering is "The American Spirit in Literature, Humanities and History," taught by Pat Nerison (humanities), Meri Deinhart (history) and Ruthanne Brown (humanities).

## **Everett Community College's**

year-long cluster program for returning women students, "Women on the Move to a Four-Year College Degree," begins its fourth year this Fall. The clustered courses for fall quarter are Introduction to Psychology (taught by Paul Marshall), Introduction to College Writing (with Anne Jackets), and Orientation to College (Laura Hedges).

## **Green River Community**

**College** is repeating two successful sets of linked classes. Kate Katims and Sylvia Mantilla are team-teaching speech communication and English composition. Steve Sisson and Ken Nelson are linking an introductory course in law, with "Business, Government and Society."

**Heritage College** is moving this fall into its second full year of coordinated studies. Roger Arango (history), Carole Krysan (American literature), and Terry Mullen are team-teaching "World Civilization, Art and Literature" this Fall. For Spring Semester, a linked course of sociology and social work is being planned.

**At Highline Community College**, World War II is the theme of a new coordinated studies offering. Larry Blades (humanities), Kay Gribble (history), and Chuck Miles (speech communication) are team-teaching this program that will explore the war and its impact on today's world in the 50 years since December 7, 1941.

**At Lower Columbia College**, Michael Strayer (psychology), Gary Meyer (English) and Kathy Gorton (study skills) are repeating the "Psychology of Success" integrative studies program that they piloted last Winter Quarter under a seed grant from the Washington Center. This full-time program, directed to high risk students deficient in both writing and reading, links work in these skills with a college level psychology class. The teaching team reports impressive success and retention rates for students in the program, and are working on their improved version of it this Fall.

**North Seattle Community College's** coordinated studies offering this Fall reflects an exciting collaboration between faculty members at both North Seattle and Seattle Central. "Journeys Ancient and Modern: Migrations in the Lives of Individuals and Societies" is being team-taught by North Seattle faculty members Michael Kischner and Marilyn Stark (both in English and humanities, and Seattle Central faculty members Audrey Wright (humanities) and Cynthia Imanaka (sociology). "Beginnings: An Introduction to History and Writing" is another unique coordinated studies offering at North this Fall. It is a program being offered both during the day and in the evening with two separate teaching teams involved. Rita Smilkstein is teaching the English component in both programs, with historians Jim Harnish and Susan Starbuck in the day program, and historian Bruce Kochis in the evening.

**Seattle Central Community College** continues to build its learning community effort in college transfer, developmental, English-as-a-Second-Language, and vocational areas. There are three full-time coordinated studies offerings during Fall Quarter. Gilda Sheppard (sociology), Minnie Collins (English) and Carl Livingston (political science) are team-teaching "Our Ways of Knowing: African Experience and Social Change." Valerie Bystrom (English) and Rich Wood (sociology) are teaching "Africa of the Imagination" with exchanging faculty member from Evergreen, anthropologist Angela Gilliam. Another exchange faculty member, psychologist Bill Heid from Western Washington University, is teaming up with Nancy Finley (psychology) and Paula Bennett (English) in "Sex, Love and the 21st Century." J.T. Stewart (English) and Tracy Lai (history) are teaching a 13-credit coordinated studies in the evening, "Eyes on the Prize: The Civil Rights Movement and Its Legacy." Jim Kelsey (economics) and Greg Langkamp (mathematics) are teaching "Dancing Bears, Raging Bulls: Tracking Down the Rhythm of Money, Markets, and the Economy," for 10-credits.

Seattle Central's ESL learning communities include two 13-credit programs: ESL Reading and Writing at Level I with Computer Literacy, taught by Sarah Hogan and Lynn Brem, and Level II Reading and Writing and Library Skills, taught by Dan Loos, and librarian Kelly McHenry.



Learning community leaders discussing implementation issues at a learning communities workshop held this summer at Evergreen. From left to right are Ted McNeilsmith, Green River Community College; Fran Brewer, Spokane Falls Community College; Millie Stenehjerm, Yakima Valley Community College; Bill Bruner, The Evergreen State College; Cheryl Morse, Skagit Valley College; and Ophelia Taylor-Walker, The Tacoma Community College/Evergreen BRIDGE program. (Photo: Tomas Black)



**Seattle University** is moving into the second year of instituting its new core curriculum, which is built around a constellation of courses related to three phases: "Foundations of Wisdom" (oriented toward Freshman); "Person in Society" (geared to the sophomore year); and "Responsibility and Service" (for upper division students). The course-work is related, but is not team-taught. This summer, faculty members teaching these core courses were involved in month-long seminars to examine the interrelationships and build coherence within each phase, and to develop more cultural and gender diversity within each phase as well. Steve Rowan (chair of the English department) led the Phase I seminar, with the question, "Is rhetoric and argumentation the appropriate emphasis for Phase I course work?" Father John Topel (religious studies) led the Phase II seminar around the interplay of individual good and the common good. Randy Bjelland (philosophy) led the Phase III seminar on the theme of justice as an ethical issue.

Bernie Steckler reports that **Matteo Ricci College (MRC) at Seattle University** continues to strengthen its consortium effort with Catholic high schools in the Seattle area. The consortium involves MRC faculty members and teachers from Eastside Catholic, John F. Kennedy and O'Dea High Schools who have worked together to design interdisciplinary courses for the high school senior year that carry Seattle University credit.

Several projects are becoming annual collaborative events. MRC and the consortium high schools put on their third annual forum on ethical issues last May. "The Problem of Prejudice" was a seminar addressing the question, "How is it possible for a person who is prejudiced to get an insight into their prejudice and change it, when they are surrounded by others who support that prejudice?" It drew students from the interdisciplinary programs in the four participating high schools and focussed on small group discussion led by the MRC students.

**Shoreline Community College's** 10-credit integrated studies classes this Fall include "The Zoo is You," combining Animal Behavior, with biologist Don McVay, and English 102, with Alex Maxwell. Dennis Peters (English) and Louise Douglas (speech communication) are repeating their successful program, "Making Sense out of Education," which examines how different cultures define what it means to be an educated person. Lloyd Keith (history) and Amy Mates (English) are also teaching together again in their coordinated studies program on Canada, entitled "The Giant Next Door." A new program this fall is called "Food for Thought," developed both for native and non-native English speakers: it combines either Analytical Reading and Writing or Communication Strategies in ESL, taught by Pam Dusenberry and Katharina Maloof, with a nutrition class, taught by Venus Deming.

**Skagit Valley College's** learning communities for Fall include a developmental learning cluster entitled, "Choices," involving reading, writing, study skills and speech communication, with faculty members Nancy Flint, Linda Moore, Cheryl Morse and Larry Sult; a coordinated studies program, "Visible Voices: Art, Narrative and Culture," taught by Lynn Dunlap and Ann Chadwick Reid; and an English-as-a-Second-Language offering involving ESL and mass communication.

**South Puget Sound Community College** is continuing its offering of linked classes. Steve Dickerson is linking his Introduction to Philosophy class with Bill Swanson's English Composition.

**Spokane Community College's** 15-credit coordinated studies offering this Fall takes "War" as its theme, with faculty members Gary Gustafson (history), Mike Burns (English), and Scott Kramer (philosophy). Dennis Keen and Denise Lambert are offering a paired class, at the developmental level, "Words' Worth: Caught in the Web of Words." A second paired class for transfer students is "Introduction to Music," taught by Mary Ann Gilpin and French, taught by Michael Zoltak.

**Spokane Falls Community College** continues to develop its 10-credit integrative studies offerings. Almut McAuley and Tom Versteeg are linking creative writing and literature. Mary Hyatt and Dixie Dill are team-teaching English composition and word processing. Alexis Nelson and Wayne Smith are linking English composition and music. Jan Swinton, Diane DeFelice and Laurel Hansen are combining reading and study skills with general biology. And Pat Nasburg and Nell Hellenberg are linking ESL conversation with a literature class.

**Tacoma Community College** has added many learning community offerings this fall. John Geubtner (business) and Bob Thaden (English) continue their 10-credit "Rethinking the Future" program, which combines business, writing, and research on key Washington state industries. Chuck Cline (speech communication), Stefanie Allen (college reading), and Marlene Bosanko (English) are teaching a full-time coordinated studies with a multicultural theme, "The American Mosaic: Voices of Immigrants." Humanities faculty Richard Wakefield and Debbie Kinerk are teaching a 10-credit coordinated studies, "Conscience and Cowardice" on the clash between conscience and the struggle for self-preservation. And, Karen Clark and Diana Mason are teaching a 10-credit developmental offering, "Overcoming Math Anxiety."

**Evergreen's Tacoma campus and TCC** are beginning the sixth year of their partnership, offering the BRIDGE program as a jointly taught lower division program in the evening on Evergreen's Tacoma campus. The year-long coordinated study has taken as its theme, "The Individual in Contemporary Society." Ophelia Taylor-Walker (speech communication, TCC) and Betsy Diffendal (cultural anthropology, Evergreen) are the teaching team.

Evergreen is receiving several faculty members on exchange this Fall. Dawn Boyer (nursing, SCCC) is teaching in the "Human Health and Behavior" coordinated studies program with George Freeman, Betty Kutter, and Earle McNeil. Jerry Shulenbarger (psychology, TCC) is teaching in the "At the Edge of History" program with Gordon Beck and Dave Hitchens. Don Worsencroft (Hawaii Community College) is teaching in the sophomore level physical science coordinated studies program, "Matter and Motion," with Clyde Barlow, Jeff Kelly and Al Leisenring.

**University of Washington** geared up for yet another expansion of its Freshman Interest Group Program this Fall. Ken Tokuno, who coordinates several undergraduate programs out of the office of the dean of Arts and Sciences, reports that the forty FIG's have enrolled about 800 students—about one quarter of this year's Freshman Class at UW. This learning community model involves triads of lower division classes in which a group of 20-25 freshman enroll, to build a coherent foundation for a major, or simply to explore an interest area. This small group of students are enrolled together in three classes, some of which are quite large. Each FIG also meets weekly in a proseminar with a peer advisor. The university strengthened the peer advisor component of the program by recruiting and training this year's peer advisors during Spring Quarter of last year. It is this program on which Vincent Tinto (of Syracuse University) will be conducting a major research project. (See the related article in this issue of the NEWS.)

Also at the UW, learning community model programs are beginning to appear in the upper division, as strategies for introducing students to study in the major. The Sociology Interest Group for this Fall clusters together Soc 352, The Family; Soc 450, Woman and Families in the Third World; an Independent Study class; and a special integrative seminar led by a graduate teaching assistant. The psychology department is launching a TRIG (Transfer and Returning-student Interest Group). These students are enrolling in two psychology classes, Research Methodology and Survey of Cognitive Psychology, and an optional third class. They are meeting weekly with an undergraduate peer advisor who is, herself, a transfer student at the University.

**Washington State University** has chosen Richard Law, former Associate Dean of Arts and Sciences, to assume the university's new Director of General Education position. Dick has been a leader at WSU in the NEH-funded development of WSU's World Civilization core course, and related general education initiatives in writing and the School of Engineering. This Fall, the World Civilizations Core course has moved into Phase I of formal implementation, with 12 sections and 1400 students enrolled. More than 30 WSU faculty members have worked in interdisciplinary teams over several years to develop this year-long, required Freshman level program. The university's English 101 class complements the World Civilization course, with its reading and writing addressing related content and themes. Dick Law reports also that the new math competency requirement is in place this fall, along with a mandatory writing test and placement process for entering students.

**Western Washington University's Fairhaven College** is involving all of its entering freshman class in a coordinated studies program on media, "The Televised Mind." Western is now the fourth campus in Washington on which this program will have been taught, the topic moving from campus to campus via exchanging faculty. Seattle Central faculty members Astrida Onat (anthropology) and Carl Waluconis (humanities) are team-teaching with Fairhaven faculty member John McClendon (political science) and Fairhaven's "Distinguished Teaching Colleague," Bill Keep (creative writing).

Among several developing connections between Western and Northwest Indian College, Fairhaven offered a "Lummi History and Culture" class last spring. The faculty, both Fairhaven graduates, were Northwest Indian College faculty member Juanita Jefferson, and Sharon Kinley, a Lummi and Western anthropology graduate student. Fairhaven Dean Marie Eaton reports that the final work for the course required the students to visit the Lummi elders and engage in an in-depth conversation about their understandings of Lummi culture, "a powerful experience for all involved."

In addition, Fairhaven faculty member Joseph Bettis went to Northwest Indian College during last Winter Quarter to teach the 301 transfer seminar, and a course in philosophy. Marie Eaton comments: "For us the connection to Northwest Indian College is a way to reach out to our neighbors, and also to have a more diverse teaching faculty and curriculum. It's a connection we will continue to foster."

**Yakima Valley College's** Fall offerings include a new 12-credit coordinated studies, "Humans in Nature: Reflections on Life Processes." Denny Konshak (humanities) and Eric Mould (biology) are collaborating on this investigation of humanistic and scientific visions of human's place in nature. Also, Judy Moore (biology) and Millie Stenehjem (speech communications) are repeating their biology/speech paired class.

## Washington Center Workshops and Conferences

**Association for General and Liberal Studies Thirty-First Annual Conference, "General Education Reform: Rhetoric and Reality."** October 16-19, 1991 at the Bellevue Hyatt in Bellevue. Co-sponsored by The Evergreen State College and the Washington Center.

**"Building Learning Communities at the Developmental Level: A Working Retreat"** January 23-24, 1992 at Rainbow Lodge in North Bend.

### **Spring Curriculum Planning Retreats at Two Sites:**

- April 23-24 in Eastern Washington at the Bozarth Center for Gonzaga University in Spokane.
- May 7-8 in Western Washington at Pack Forest near Eatonville.

## Other Conferences of Interest

**Community College Humanities Association, "Creating and Confronting Change in the '90's."** San Francisco Hilton, November 14-16, 1991. For information call Patricia Grignon, Saddleback Community College, 714-582-4726.

**American Association for Higher Education Annual Conference,** Chicago, Illinois, April 5-8, 1992. For information, call AAHE 202-293-6440.

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## The Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education

■ Established in 1985 at Evergreen as an inter-institutional consortium, the Center focuses on low-cost, high-yield approaches to educational reform, emphasizing better utilization and sharing of existing resources through inter-institutional collaboration. Established with funding from the Exxon and Ford Foundations, the Center is now supported by the Washington State Legislature.

■ Includes 42 participating institutions: all of the state's public four-year institutions and community colleges, and nine independent colleges.

■ Supports and coordinates inter-institutional faculty exchanges, the development of interdisciplinary "learning community" programs, conferences, seminars and technical assistance on effective approaches to teaching and learning.



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